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The 'scare 'em' Soviet silos

The Pentagon and other prophets of doom in Washington suddenly are having second thoughts about those 60 new missile silos under construction in the Soviet Union.

Recall how last March Sen. Henry M. Jackson, the king of the hawks, gave out the ominous word on national television that the Russians are "now in the process of deploying a new generation, an advanced generation offensive system."

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, not to be outdone by Sen. Jackson, in a speech on April 21 said intelligence "evidence confirms the sobering fact that the Soviet Union is involved in a new -- and apparently extensive -- ICBM construction program."

Although the Pentagon admitted at the time that it was unable to determine whether the silos were for a new missile system or a modified SS9, it left the impression the Russians were escalating the nuclear arms race. That immediately set off a rash of "scare" stories in the press and Secretary Laird came back with the warning that he might have to ask Congress for more money "to preserve the sufficiency of our strategic forces."

Recently, the picture became a little more clear when it was disclosed that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had determined that two-thirds of the silos were the SS11 which is a relatively smaller ICBM than the SS9. Privately Defense officials are saying now that the most likely prospect is that the Russians will combine the silos with updated versions of the SS9 and SS11 missiles -- the updating to include multiple warheads known as MIRVs. The U.S. it is to be noted, has already begun equipping its Minuteman ICBMs with MIRVs and expected the Russians to do the same by 1972.

In any event, this assessment of the Russian silo building program is considered much less provocative than deployment of a big new missile system as the Pentagon originally led us to believe.

As Sen. William Proxmire said, these earlier "scare 'em" statements probably were made to win support for a "bigger and fatter military budget." It is a familiar old story with the Defense Department.